

Congress, the Hearings and the Nation's Business

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A key part of President Nixon's effort to put Watergate behind him is the contention that, as he said last Wednesday night, "a continued, backward-looking obsession with Watergate is causing this nation to neglect matters of far greater importance." Since Mr. Nixon, according to his spokesmen, did not spend any time watching the Senate hearings, one assumes he was thinking of Congress when he told the American people that "your elected representatives here in Washington ought to get on with the job." Indeed, from Mr. Nixon's remarks, a casual listener might get the impression that Congress has been consumed by Watergate, and that while seven senators have been conducting the hearings, the other 93 senators and 435 representatives have been glued to their television sets, unable to tear themselves away to focus on anything else.

In the interests of accuracy, we took a look at how the people's elected representatives actually spent their time between May 17, when the hearings began, and the start of the summer recess on Aug. 3. In sheer quantitative terms, the record hardly adds up to massive paralysis. During that period there were 226 roll-call votes in the Senate and 216 in the House. More than 50 bills were sent to the White House and signed into public law. Nor did the legislators do their work during the station-breaks; on the contrary, viewers will recall the station-breaks often occurred when roll-call votes were taken on the Senate floor.

According to the Congressional Record, the rest of Congress did not even break stride during the most important phases of the hearings. In the five days in June that John W. Dean III was testifying, the Record reported 156 meetings of Senate, House or joint committees and subcommittees. There were 114 such meet-

ings during the three days of John Mitchell's testimony in July. At the climax of the hearings, the seven days devoted to John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, the rest of Congress was engaged in a pre-recess rush of activity. In addition to 292 committee and subcommittee sessions, the Senate met all day on each one of those seven days, while the House sat for a total of 49 hours on six days, including two 12-hour marathon sessions which even kept the representatives from going home to watch the evening re-runs.

Granted that some of this legislative work was trivial or second-rate. Even so, while the hearings went on, the Congress managed to finish such matters as the bombing cut-off, the minimum wage bill, the farm bill, the highway/mass transit bill, the public broadcasting authorization, the law enforcement assistance bill, and a reasonable number of appropriations bills. Both Houses passed war powers legislation, anti-impoundment bills and trans-Alaskan pipeline measures. The House dealt with legal services, foreign aid and military procurement. The Senate passed the land use and campaign finance bills. The Ways and Means Committee has been working hard on Mr. Nixon's trade bill, and the housing committees are impatiently awaiting the administration's housing proposals, due next month.

Some of this legislation and some of the leadership in Congress do have serious deficiencies, but that is not the point. The real point is that Watergate, far from slowing the Congress down, has actually spurred it to greater activity and independence. This may be little comfort to the President, but it should be welcome news for a nation which—before Watergate—probably had more reason to worry about weakness and inertia on Capitol Hill.